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ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVES

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1289/ehp.1204942>

Online 11 December 2012



NIEHS

National Institute of
Environmental Health Sciences

National Institutes of Health
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Data Disclosure for Chemical Evaluations

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Short Title: Increasing Data Disclosure

Key Words: chemicals, data disclosure, information quality, pesticides

Acknowledgements: This Commentary is based in part on discussions during a meeting convened by CropLife America on May 13th, 2011, in Washington D.C. Participants in the meeting included the co-authors of this work and the following experts, whose helpful comments we gratefully acknowledge: Vicki Dellarco, Environmental Protection Agency; David Epstein, USDA; Michael Fry, American Bird Conservancy; George Gray, Department of Environmental and Occupational Health, George Washington University; Sheldon Krimsky, Urban & Environmental Policy & Planning, School of Arts and Sciences at Tufts University; Janis McFarland, Syngenta Crop Protection, Inc.; Jennifer Sass, Natural Resources Defense Council; and Jill Schroeder, Department of Entomology, Plant Pathology and Weed Science, New Mexico State University. The views expressed in this document are entirely those of the authors and not necessarily those of any organization(s) with which any author is affiliated.

Competing Financial Interests: Dr. Lutter, an independent consultant, consults for CropLife America (CLA) and received financial support from it to moderate a forum and serve as principal author. Dr. Barrow consults for Dow AgroSciences LLC, an R&D-based agrochemical producer, registrant and marketer. Dr. Borgert received CLA funding to review and analyze scientific literature on data quality. Mr. Conrad has in the past received funding by the American Chemistry Council to author work on the quality of scientific work evaluating chemicals. Dr. Edwards consults for a variety of pesticide manufacturers and for CLA. Dr. Felsot has consulted with nonprofit organizations funded by CLA about pesticide issues.

Abstract

Background: Public disclosure of scientific data used by the government to make regulatory decisions for chemicals is a practical step that can enhance public confidence in the scientific basis of such decisions.

Objectives: We review the Environmental Protection Agency's current practices regarding disclosure of data underlying regulatory and policy decisions involving chemicals, including pesticides. We seek to identify additional opportunities for EPA to disclose data and, more generally, to promote broad access to data it uses, regardless of origin.

Discussion: We recommend that when EPA proposes a regulatory determination or other policy decision that relies on scientific research, it should provide sufficient underlying raw data and information about methods to enable reanalysis and attempts to reproduce independently the work, including the sensitivity of results to alternative analyses. This recommendation applies regardless of who conducted the work. If EPA is unable to provide such transparency, it should state whether it had full access to all underlying data and methods. A timely version of submitted data cleared of information about confidential business matters and personal privacy should fully meet the standards of transparency articulated below, including public access sufficient for others to undertake an independent reanalysis.

Conclusion: Reliable chemical evaluation is essential for protecting public health and the environment and ensuring availability of useful chemicals under appropriate conditions. By permitting qualified researchers to endeavor to reproduce independently the analyses used in regulatory determinations of pesticides and other chemicals, such data disclosure would increase confidence in the scientific basis of such determinations.

Introduction

The evaluation of chemicals is an important topic of public interest. Against this backdrop, CropLife America, an association of agricultural pesticide manufacturers, sponsored a meeting of experts from a variety of backgrounds to address how to judge the quality of scientific work in chemical evaluation and, if possible, to seek consensus or agreement. This paper presents a proposal from some of those experts addressing a more specific topic: disclosure of and access to data underlying regulatory determinations concerning pesticides and other chemicals.

It is axiomatic that scientific work used in regulatory determinations should be of high quality [e.g., Information Quality Act (IQA) 2000]. Greater public disclosure of data and methods is a practical step toward ensuring that scientific work used in regulatory determinations meets this standard for quality. Greater disclosure should reduce bias because it makes masking of bias more difficult. In addition, the reliability of scientific work used in regulatory evaluations of chemicals is likely to increase if greater disclosure leads to increased evaluation of data quality and that evaluation then leads to improved designs and generally higher quality studies.

Furthermore, access to the underlying raw data and methodology may be required for public commenters to provide informed comment to regulatory agencies who will rely on the study (Portland Cement Ass'n v. Ruckelshaus 1973). Ultimately, the reliability of scientific work can be judged definitively only if researchers have disclosed sufficient data and information about methods and results to permit others to evaluate data quality and to try to reproduce or replicate key findings, including the sensitivity of results to alternative analyses.

This does not mean that independent replicability is by itself a standard sufficient for quality. Replicability by independent entities is one of the three generally accepted tenets of valid regulatory science. The other two tenets are that (i) the identity and authenticity of scientific measurements be verifiable within a defined range of precision, and (ii) measurements and observations not be confounded by extraneous factors known to corrupt their accuracy and precision (Borgert et al. 2011; Gori 2009a, 2009b). The heads of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry and the National Institute of Environmental and Health Sciences have endorsed these tenets in testimony (Subcommittee on Health, US House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce 2010). Henry and Conrad (2008) discuss a variety of other standards and practices (e.g., peer review) that can be used as indicia of quality. While disclosure by itself may thus not be sufficient to ensure quality, it is necessary.

The IQA requires the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and agencies like EPA to issue guidelines for ensuring and maximizing the quality, objectivity, utility, and integrity of information disseminated by federal agencies. OMB's guidelines under the IQA embrace a disclosure principle, stating that when agencies disseminate "influential scientific, financial or statistical information," they "shall include a high degree of transparency about data and methods to facilitate the reproducibility of such information by qualified third parties" (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 2002). OMB's guidelines explain that the standard they use, "capable of being substantially reproduced", is less stringent than a 'confirmation' standard because it simply requires that an agency's analysis be sufficiently transparent that another qualified party could replicate it through reanalysis. EPA has its own information quality guidelines, which are consistent with those of OMB (U.S. EPA, 2002). Although one federal district court found

that the IQA “does not create a legal right to access to information” (*Salt Institute v. Leavitt* 2006), two more recent federal appeal courts left open the possibility of judicial review of agency actions measured against IQA requirements (*Prime Time Int’l Co v. Vilsack* 2010, *Americans for Safe Access v. HHS* 2010). Thus, the IQA at a minimum provides support for the disclosure concepts discussed here and may provide opportunities for enforcing such disclosure.

Legislation commonly known as the Shelby Amendment (Treasury and General Governmental Appropriations Act, 1999 1998) led OMB to revise its Circular A-110 so that, in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, federal agencies must release research data relating to published research findings produced under an award that were used by the agency in developing action that has the force and effect of law (AAAS 2005 and U.S. OMB 1999). Much of the research that U.S. EPA relies upon in making decisions regarding regulated chemicals, particularly pesticides, is not federally funded, although published studies cited in EPA’s Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS) often received federal funding.

In describing implementation of the Shelby Amendment, Conrad and Becker state: “It seems only fair for privately-funded work to be subject to the same disclosure requirement, at least when the persons conducting or funding it submit it to an agency” (Conrad and Becker 2011). Similarly, a report by the Bipartisan Policy Center, “Improving the Use of Science in Regulatory Policy,” recommends: “Studies used in the formulation of regulation should be subject to data access requirements equivalent to those under the Shelby Amendment and its implementing Circular regardless of who funded the study” (Bipartisan Policy Center 2009).

Several prominent journals have adopted data disclosure policies intended to facilitate replication. *Nature*'s policy states: "An inherent principle of publication is that others should be able to replicate and build upon the authors' published claims" (Editors of *Nature* 2011). *Nature* elaborates, "a condition of publication in a *Nature* journal is that authors are required to make materials, data and associated protocols promptly available to readers without undue qualifications in material transfer agreements" (Editors of *Nature* 2011). Similarly, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* states: "To allow others to replicate and build on work published in *PNAS*, authors must make materials, data, and associated protocols available to readers" (Editors of *PNAS* 2011). *Science* has similar policies (Editors of *Science* 2011) and, in addition, recently published a special section on the importance and challenges of data replication and reproducibility in different fields (Jasny et al. 2011).

Our recommendations are consistent with the Shelby Amendment, the recommendations of the Bipartisan Policy Center, and the practices of prominent journals, as well as Conrad and Becker. They are aimed at promoting the broadest possible access to data used by U.S. EPA, regardless of who prepared or compiled the data.

Discussion

U.S. EPA already has access to considerable data underlying studies submitted by pesticide registrants that it uses in regulatory decisions regarding pesticides. For example, if a regulated entity submits to U.S. EPA a Good Laboratory Practice (GLP) study required for a pesticide registration, it must retain all "raw" data to comply with GLP requirements (e.g., 40 CFR §

160.190 and § 160.195, EPA 1989). U.S. EPA has access to such data because it may refuse to consider reliable for the purpose of supporting a pesticide registration any data from a study that is not conducted in accordance with those GLP rules (40 CFR § 160.17). On the other hand, a U.S. EPA request for data used in a peer-reviewed or grey literature study may be fulfilled completely, partially, or not at all.

We recommend that when U.S. EPA proposes a regulatory determination or other policy decision for pesticides or other chemicals that relies on scientific research, it should provide sufficient disclosure of data and information about methods to enable reanalysis and attempts at independent replication of the work, including the sensitivity of results to alternative analyses. This recommendation applies whether the decision is a discrete compound-specific decision, such as setting an uncertainty factor or determining a benchmark dose, or a programmatic policy decision, such as adoption of a particular study design or method for particular types of testing. Such disclosure should include all raw data, i.e., data as originally collected in accordance with research protocols, the research protocols themselves, and all methods (including computer programs for statistical modeling). Thus it would extend from the supporting science; e.g., animal toxicity studies used to calculate cancer slope factors, to risk assessments; i.e., analytic work that takes as given the results of toxicological and epidemiological work and integrates them into an assessment of risk. It would be sufficiently detailed to include recorded ages and sex of test animals, all lab results, all recorded observations about health and clinical conditions, recorded according to research protocols. Disclosure should be sufficient to provide for a full understanding of the operation of any proprietary models used in underlying studies.

Further, this recommendation applies regardless of who conducted the work; e.g., researchers with industry, government, or academic institutions. In those instances where U.S. EPA is unable to provide such a level of transparency, due to lack of access or legal restrictions on disclosure, it should state the degree of access it had to such data. Finally, if it did not enjoy full access, it should offer a cogent explanation of why it decided to make regulatory or policy decisions using results of analyses that lacked such a desirable level of transparency and how, specifically, it weighed such results relative to other evidence.

EPA has taken some constructive steps in this direction. Its Office of Pesticide Programs has issued Evaluation Guidelines for Ecological Toxicity Data in the Open Literature that partially implement the ideas discussed here (EPA 2011). In particular, the guidelines acknowledge that the “most reliable means of determining whether study conclusions can be verified is through access to the raw data.” They also state: “Where raw data are not available to verify the study endpoints, the reviewer must discuss the uncertainties associated with quantitative use of the data relative to studies where raw data are provided.” Finally, they advise analysts that, “[d]epending on the importance of the open literature study to the risk assessment conclusions, attempts should be made to obtain missing information from the study, including the raw data, if possible.”

While these steps represent improvements in access to and also disclosure of underlying data, they fall short of our recommendations. First, they do not apply generally to all data used for chemical evaluation. Second, EPA discusses access to raw data as important for verification of conclusions. But it does not mention replication of results, though replication (including an assessment of the robustness of results) is an essential part of ensuring validity. In addition,

these EPA guidelines are silent about access to detailed information about methods (e.g., computer code). Fourth, the guidelines require an analyst to “discuss uncertainties associated with quantitative use of the data.” A better approach, adopted here, would be for EPA to state that it will explain how, specifically, it weighed such results relative to other data. Finally, the guidelines limit instructions to obtain raw data, “depending on the importance of the open literature study,” and appear focused on “missing information,” rather than declaring that all raw data underlying studies used in quantitative regulatory determinations should be generally available to EPA and the public.

Our recommendation does not mean that U.S. EPA should require that all disseminated data be subjected to a reproducibility requirement. As explained in OMB’s Information Quality Guidelines (OMB 2002), constraints related to ethics, feasibility or confidentiality may preclude disclosure or a replication exercise (i.e., a new experiment, test, or sample), prior to each dissemination. Instead, we recommend that U.S. EPA generally provide sufficient transparency about data and methods that a qualified member of the public could undertake an independent reanalysis. These standards for transparency should apply to agency analyses of data from a single study as well as to analyses that combine information from multiple studies.

Section 10 of the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) provides for public access to safety and efficacy information (FIFRA 1972, EPA 2010a). There are two types of exceptions, which are important to respect, and which have been implemented without undermining the objectives of disclosure discussed in this paper. First, certain information that is generally not related to assessing risks or making regulatory determinations, is excluded from

disclosure as confidential business information. By law, EPA may not make public information that discloses:

- manufacturing or quality control processes;
- methods for testing and measuring the quantity of deliberately added inert ingredients;
- and
- the identity or percentage quantity of deliberately added inert ingredients (FIFRA 1972). (We note that on December 23rd, 2009, U.S. EPA issued an advance notice of proposed rulemaking to increase the public availability of information regarding the identity of the inert ingredients of pesticide products (U.S. EPA 2010b)).

Second, FIFRA protects the proprietary interests of those pesticide manufacturers that first made the investments necessary to produce the data. It requires U.S. EPA to ensure that the release of data does not unfairly benefit the competitors of those companies (FIFRA 1972). To accomplish this, U.S. EPA must obtain, before disclosure of such data, affirmations from recipients that they will not give the data to multinational business interests that might seek to register in other countries the pesticide products that are the subject of the testing (U.S. EPA 2012). In addition, the Agency must keep lists of the people who obtain such data and who they represent.

U.S. EPA currently reviews and redacts data before a version cleared of confidential business information (CBI), can be made public. This process currently requires the public to file a formal request under FOIA for each study for which it wants undisclosed information. U.S. EPA reported to Congress in 2010 that it has “completely redesigned its electronic FOIA reading

room to make tens of thousands of highly sought after pesticide science and regulatory records publicly available without the filing of a FOIA request” (Gottesman 2010). To further advance such reforms, we suggest that U.S. EPA convene a diverse stakeholder group (e.g., through its Pesticide Program Dialogue Committee, EPA 2012b) to solicit specific ideas about ways to streamline the current process to facilitate timely disclosure of data consistent with legal protections under FIFRA and FOIA. A timely CBI-cleared version of industry submitted data should fully meet the standards of transparency articulated in this paper, including public access to enough data and details of the study design that others could undertake an independent replication effort.

The timing of data disclosure matters. U.S. EPA should make publicly available data underlying a regulatory determination or other policy decisions for pesticides by the beginning of the applicable public comment period, so as to provide interested members of the public a meaningful opportunity for review before commenting on the proposal. Disclosure would generally occur after publication of academic articles. An exception would occur if the publication process were unavoidably so lengthy that the study is forthcoming rather than published when used by the regulator in a proposed regulatory or policy decision. If the agency uses data submitted by a manufacturer that are protected from release by federal law, the regulatory agency should provide information on the data and methods generally in a manner that facilitates efforts at independent analysis by qualified members of the public.

Conclusion

Evaluating chemicals within a science-based framework is essential to protecting public health and the environment and ensuring availability of useful chemicals under appropriate terms and conditions. Public access to data and methodologies used in regulatory determinations is equally essential to maintaining public trust in regulators' decisions. The preceding principles and recommendations regarding data access will help achieve these goals by permitting qualified researchers to endeavor to replicate analytic results independently.

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